

BY JEREMY CURTIS

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. – Last spring, WVU football offensive coordinator Jeff Mullen embarked on an 11-city tour lasting eight days, tripping city to city on a private jet plane in search of two dual-threat high school quarterbacks who featured all the tools necessary to fit into his version of the spread offense.

Quarterback Jarrett Brown graduated after starting his senior season. Before him, Patrick White led WVU during the most successful four-year run in program history. With Geno Smith -- who will be a sophomore next season -- the only quarterback remaining on the Mountaineers roster that has ever thrown a pass in a college game, recruiting and signing a pair of promising quarterbacks for the future became top priority for the 2010 class.

“It was a little abnormal because of our dire need at the quarterback position, to make sure we did it right,” said Mullen.

After rigorous film sessions and evaluations, Mullen, along with the help of the WVU staff, initially identified 15 prospects who appeared to have what it takes to quarterback the Mountaineers offense in the future. From there, Mullen’s journey began.

He flew to Rome, Ga., Buford, Texas, Memphis, Tenn., New Orleans, Hattiesburg, Miss., Miami, Fla., Boca Raton, Fla., Tampa, Fla., Philadelphia, Pa., Detroit, Mich., and Dayton, Ohio to meet with players, coaches, opposing coaches, guidance counselors and math teachers in a comprehensive recruiting search to locate the two best quarterbacks available.

“It was tough because it was a non-contact period, so you couldn’t spend time with a kid,” said Mullen. “We spent time with the coaches and we watched tape. We talked to the counselors and athletic directors.”

Mullen sneaked in a few opportunities to watch quarterbacks during spring practices and he even watched some running track.

“You could see them throw, run and catch. Everybody that we saw could play,” Mullen said. “I wanted to try to find guys that fit what we wanted to do schematically and the kind of people that would fit into our meeting room and get along well.”

Of the 15 targets who were identified and scouted, two particular record-setting players – Memphis quarterback Barry Brunetti, along with Jeremy Johnson, of Texas – stood out above the rest.

Both Brunetti and Johnson had all the physical attributes and football skills to run the spread offense. SEC, Big XII and Big Ten schools offered scholarships to Brunetti and Johnson – word was out in terms of the impact they could have on the college level.

“It feels to get on some guys early, to get them to commit and to hold on to them,” Mullen said of Brunetti and Johnson, who both committed last summer. “We would have worked our rear ends off on these guys whether or not they were taking multiple visits. At no point in the process did we ever feel like we were in jeopardy with Barry or Jeremy.”

What Mullen, a cerebral-minded offensive coach who dives into Xs and Os trying to find a winning formula, wanted to know was where Brunetti and Johnson were at from a mental standpoint.

“One of the things I always try to do is mess with them, crack on them, joke with them. If there’s a defensive mentality or resistance or an inability to come back with wit, I think maybe they don’t think on their feet so good.

“You do little tricks like that to get a sense. Both of these kids will snap right back at you and have fun.”

Brunetti said, “He used to joke about girls. Like if a lot of girls come into your room, he wanted me to say something fast. He thinks there will be a lot of girls trying to get on me when I get there. He wanted to see how I would react.”

Brunetti was up to the challenge.

“He used to tell me he liked the way I would answer his questions because I never got mad,” he said. “I use to always do a joke on him. He always knew I was smooth.”

Mullen and Brunetti first met last summer and it was then that their close relationship started. “That’s my guy,” Brunetti said. “I’ve been talking with coach Mullen like that since the summer. We wouldn’t even talk about football -- we talked about life.”

The bond was similar between Mullen and Johnson.

“We were acting like that when I first met him,” Johnson said. “He was joking about Texas and I was joking him about where he stays at on the East coast. It was just a friendly little thing. All the coaches did that with me.”

Mullen said, “Relationship is everything. I had to learn Patrick’s quirks and learn how to reach Jarrett. I don’t survive this place if not for Patrick White or Jarrett Brown.”

Absorbing mental parts of the college game, especially being a quarterback, is typically the toughest transition for incoming freshman. But Brunetti and Johnson played in similar offenses in high school, so the idea is Mullen can mentor them into his system quicker than other quarterback prospects WVU considered.

“The only difference is terminology,” Brunetti said. “When [linebacker recruit] Jewone [Snow] was there, when I was up on my visit, I was telling Jewone when the

play was going on -- I would say where the ball was going to go and it would go there. He was really impressed because I knew the offense so fast.”

Memphis University School coach Bobby Alston, who coached Brunetti, was also won over by Mullen, who spent many hours recruiting and establishing relationships at MUS. Alston and Mullen talked football strategy and Alston believes in time, Brunetti will make a nice adjustment to playing in college, where athletes are bigger, stronger, faster and smarter.

“It was fun to sit around in the office and do Xs and Os with the board and get his input on some things they’re doing,” Alston said.

Of Brunetti’s upcoming transition, Alston said, “I think there are two parts to it: the mental part -- I think that’s probably the ongoing process. Both sides will adapt a little bit. They can’t overload a freshman with plays and reads. The other part will be Barry adjusting to the speed of the game.”

Johnson’s coach at Silsbee High School – Bobby McGallion – was also thoroughly impressed with Mullen, head coach Bill Stewart and running backs coach Chris Beatty, who all frequented Silsbee to recruit Johnson and give WVU its new recruiting presence in Texas.

“I saw a lot of coaches coming through here since last May and I was really impressed with the way they handled themselves,” said McGallion.

McGallion used Johnson’s skill set similarly to how Mullen will and believes in time Johnson will also comprehend the WVU offense. “It’s going to take him a while to get comfortable with it and where he’s totally reacting to situations as opposed to having to think his way through once the ball is snapped,” said McGallion. “But I don’t have any doubt that he’s going to be able to handle that part of it.”

Alston and McGallion both acknowledged that WVU has laid the foundation to recruit future players from their respective areas, which the Mountaineers had not previously tapped for talent.

“Barry is well known around here,” Alston said. “If he’s having the kind of experience we anticipate he will have, that will give them entrance into some other households for some other players.”

Alston continued: “Coach Stewart has the player’s best interest at heart and that’s not always the way it is in today’s world, in college athletics. He’s a guy who really sells well with moms and dads and he’s got those younger guys that do well talking with the kids, so I think they’ve got a good set up.”

Considering the depth that WVU has assembled at quarterback, even though it’s youthful depth, the Mountaineers will have open competition in the summer to sort out the starter and backup. Smith, who is currently nursing a broke foot, appears to have an edge having been in the system for a year, but Mullen explained he is not the

clear favorite heading into the spring and up to the start of next season.

“When they all get here, they’re all going to get opportunities to show me they can play. Geno is not my favorite,” said Mullen. “We got to win and we got to win now. The best one is going to play.”

Stewart said, “I hope they all stay. We only have one football.”